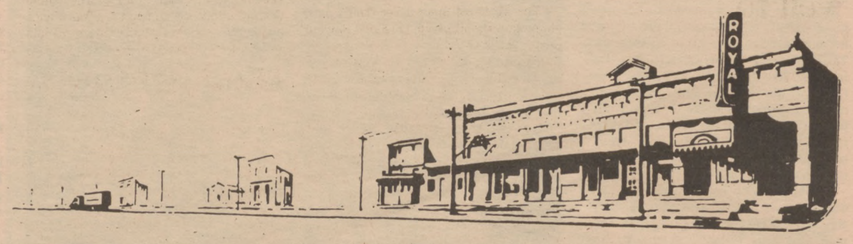
Cinema/The Last Picture Show

Nowhere else to go

"... Bogdanovich has studied America and why we can never have the good old days -- places like Anarene in the early '50s..."



Down on one corner is the Royal Theater, somewhere up the street is the pool hall, over yonder is the cafe where Genevive makes a pretty good cheeseburger. In between is a Texaco station with the "E" missing. Welcome to Anarene, deep in the heart of Texas.

Anarene, Texas is a fact -- a never-never land which can only occur in the blackest recesses of the mind. It's the kind of place you can go home to only if you really have nowhere to go.

"The Last Picture Show" is Anarene, Texas, in 1950, as it actually was -- not as it could become after years of other places and other experiences. It is the roughest of beginnings and the most narrow of all dead ends.

Not too long ago, Peter Bogdanovich wrote film reviews. He associated himself with a group known as the "auteur" critics who judge a film not on its individual basis, but within the context of what other pieces a particular director has presented.

Through his writings Bogdanovich became quite versed in various styles of film-making in much the same way as a parodist must understand the style of another writer. Steeped in his film theories of other director's works and loaded with great awe for the "masters" such as John Ford, Howard Hawks, Orson Welles and Hitchcock, Bogdanovich eventually moved behind the camera.

His first technical work in films was with "Wild Angels," a 1966 bike and violence flick directed by Roger Corman, a rising star to the "auteur" critics. Bogdanovich then directed a film called "Targets" which featured Boris Karloff in a story of a Charles Whitman-type mass-murderer which was an impassioned call for gun control.

Then, "The Last Picture Show " was released in late 1971, and there weren't enough words to say "Excellent."

Bogdanovich chose the almost-new West as a vehicle to pay homage to his friend John Ford, the father of the Hollywood Western and the man who made John Wayne a symbol for law-and-order in the Old West.

His story came from an almost unheard-of novel by Larry McMurty, who had written numerous novels about the new West but was chiefly known as the man who had written the novel from which the movie "Hud" was made.

Working with a script he and McMurtry had written, Bogdanovich and his cast of relatively unknown actors moved into the town of Archer City, Texas, (pop. 2,000) to film.

Bogdanovich left Texas with what is probably the best film about life in America since "Bonnie and Clyde."

Sonny and Duane are smalltown high school heroes. They play on the Anarene team and date nice girls from respectable homes. They have odd jobs on Saturdays and meet their dates in the back row of the theatre on Saturday nights and neck instead of watching "Father of the Bride."

Through the citizens of Anarene, we relive one crucial year and learn what was happening during a time in our lives when we were being taught to walk and talk and accept those smalltown wisdoms and hells which Sonny and Duane are desperately trying to escape.

Texas is a huge place noted for its flatness and open ranges. Anarene is a small town. Its flatness is inescapable and its open ranges are taken over by robot-like oil rigs and death-like plants which roll onward, never becoming a permanent part of the scene.

In much the same way as the scrub oaks, the young people in the film never seem to belong in Anarene in the early '50's. They seem to be waiting for the right time so they can roll onward.

And they know that there is something out there waiting for them, too. They go to the Royal Theater every Saturday night. Movies have become their one means of escape from Anarene. The picture show gives them visions of wondrous things, many times bigger than life in smalltown Texas.

And they will not be trapped by Anarene. They have learned to watch things that move -- like films and, occasionally, TV. They know there is something bigger -- somewhere.

So, the world for Sonny and Duane and Jacy becomes nude swimming in Wichita Falls and going to Mexico for whores and booze and getting laid or getting somebody else laid. Life is more than the flatness and the oil rigs and the scrub oaks.

While the kids in Anarene are searching, the older folks have accepted their real hell. Sam the Lion is content to roll cigarets and talk over old times and go fishing and dream of the happiness he once could have had in Anarene. Sam is Anarene's leading citizen and, quite unwittingly, serves as the "guru" for Sonny and his crowd.

Sam the Lion owns the pool hall, the cafe, and the Royal Theater. He has brought the outside world to Anarene. He has "turned the kids on" to what lies beyond Anarene or even Wichita Falls or yes, even Texas.

Ruth Popper is another respected member of Anarene society. She is the dowdy wife of the high school coach and a good Church worker. Ruth is far from content with her life but never sees a means of rising above Anarene until she meets Sonny. The young man offers her a way to take some of the things she missed on her first time through life in Anarene.

Ruth, however, isn't the person Sam the Lion is. In return for Sonny's body, she can only offer a false hope. Only when she finally accepts him as a son does she offer him any chance of escaping from Anarene.

Lois Farrow is married to the richest man in town. Her daughter Jacy is the prettiest girl in town. Her young stud Abilene is cool and mysterious. She is a miserable woman.

Lois is a gossip and conniver. Her cunning attempts to find a bigger world for Jacy cause much of the conflict within the film. Lois is a prime mover. She would be as hopeless as Ruth Popper except she sees Jacy as a chance of doing everything a second time. She is always looking because she is trying to find an escape for Jacy and, just possibly, herself.

Timothy Bottoms and Jeff Bridges play the major roles of Sonny and Duane with the ease of veteran performers. The two are perfect mixtures of youthful innocence and youthful maturity. They react to the hell of Anarene with spontaneity and a deep sense of feeling.

Cybil Sheppard, a model, makes a stunning debut as Jacy. Much of her story is her desire to lose her virginity. To Jacy, sex is bigger than life.

Sheppard plays Jacy as the eternally wronged woman. She is coy, cunning, sensual, and innocent -- a child-woman. Sheppard brings some subtle touches to her role - a desperation, an ennui - which brings Jacy more to life than the other kids in the film.

Two experienced actresses turn in perfect performances. Cloris Leachman, a TV actress, and Ellen Burstyn play the pivotal roles of Ruth Popper and Lois Farrow.

Although they never appear in a scene together, the two serve as perfect foils for each other. Emotionally, they are opposites. Ruth is sweet and motherly and respectable. Lois is loud and sensual and shady.

Leachman and Burstyn bring truthfulness and feminity and polish to their roles which present them as two well-rounded human beings. They are true-to-life, not characters in a movie.

Sam the Lion is the soul of life in Anarene and veteran actor Ben Johnson clearly shows us why as he performs his role. Johnson becomes everybody's grandfather who used to sit patiently and tell stories of the old days.

Johnson gives a perfect performance, establishing himself as father, myth, owner, and lover of the town and its people.

As director, Bogdanovich deserves much praise. Not only has he exacted keen performances and insights from an excellent cast, but he has succeeded in making a series of scenes hold together as cogent moments and exciting cinema.

Working from a subtle, conventional point of view, Bogdanovich presents his tale almost objectively. His using Ford's much-used style of directness and reality pinpoints the grayness and the convention of life in Anarene.

But he uses this directness without ever becoming strained or "heavy."

The final scene is one of the most touching, emotionally disturbing, and, yet, restrained cuts in the film. Yet, dramatically, it is the high point of the film. He brings high drama to his scenes but never allows the audience to forget that the hell of Anarene is still a major force in everything.

Janis Joplin would have loved "The Last Picture Show." On the Cavett show before her death, she talked about her Texas, the same Texas Peter Bogdanovich brings to the screen.

Dressed in boas and a sateen dress, she giggled and said, "I'm going to show some people in Texas what living is."

No real hate or disgust in her voice. Just a hint that she was thankful for having escaped a certain hell in a Texas town.

Drive through any small town within a 50-mile radius of Columbia and look at all the Anarenes with their theater marquees proudly announcing "CLOSED".

"The Last Picture Show" has already played in many of these towns and nothing new is bound to come through town for a long while.

Bogdanovich has studied America and come up with a picture of why we can never have the "good old days" when things were simple and people were content -- places like Anarene in the early '50's: they simply weren't that God-damned good.

michael smith

The Godfather

Although "The Godfather" is competently acted, and directed with admirable restraint and sense of style, the overall film is not the "beginning of a new wave " nor the culmination of any old wave, nor anything very much spectacular except as a money-maker.

For its stars, "The Godfather" is a great boost to flagging or fledgling careers. For author Mario Puzo and the producers, it is a gold mine. For director Francis Ford Coppola, "The Godfather"must be a mere stepping stone, a fairly successful attempt at Viscontian technique -- the technique of Italian post-war realism. Those who applaud this technique as a permanent style development for Coppola, consider that his subject was a post-war Italian family, and the technique was historio cinematically appropriate here, but can handle the massive pacing necessary for such a style well enough to effectively make other films in this manner? Will he even try?

Didn't Coppola fail to carry this style through to the end of the movie? After the death of Don Vito there is a decided change in pace. Such a change, if voluntary, might have been an effort to say something about the changing modern times, the increased pace of contemporary life as exemplified in the new "Godfather," Michael. But the changed pace is inconsistent. We have an attempt to retain the older, unhurried stlye by the minute examination of the baptismal ceremony for Michael's Godson, counterpointed in content, but sabotaged in style, by the concurrent and hasty sketching of the slaughter of Michael's "political" enemies. The change in pace in not voluntary, it is necessitated by time limitations, by exterior restraints. I am not saying the "The Godfather" should have been a longer movie. It is certainly long enough as it is, but the distribution of time could have been just a little more

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"...the character of the Godfather adapted well to Brando..."

balanced, or else a decided break should have been made.

Cappola 's handling of the film is at its best during one particular scene. Michael has entered a meeting with his family's gangland enemies. A gun has been hidden at the location so that he can eliminate these two men. To this point Michael is the most sympathetic character in the film, therefore the tension is great as he fumbles behind the toilet for the weapon hidden there. The sound track becomes a loud, heavy, rhythymic thud, communicating Michael's tension and panic to the audience, and carrying through the entire scene. The audience becomes closely involved in the action, ready to render assistance in any way possible.

Performances in "The Godfather" were not the most gratifying aspects of the movie. Marlon Brando as Vito Corleone is quite surprising, although it seems easy praise. He has been thoroughly congratulated for his portrayal, but aren't the critics really saying the character of the Godfather adapted well to Brando. He suits the role, personality superceding talent as a determining factor. The final product is good, but it can't really make a statement on the skill of the actor.

Al Pacino as Michael had more to do than anyone else, and he usually did it, although he was better in "Panic in Needle Park." Sometimes his intent looks became mere set stares. Robert Duvall ("M+A+S+H") as Tom Hagen was perhaps the best of the lot, with Richard Castellano ("Lovers and Other Strangers") coming in a close second as the affable but ruthless Clemenza.

There are few basic differences between the movie and Mario Puzo's book on which it is based. Puzo did the screenplay, which undoubtedly accounts for its faithfulness though there is a bit of condensing in the latter portion which probably creates much of the pacing deficiencies.

The film retains a feeling of slickness which best-selling novels usually boast, and the "expose" attitude about the life of powerful Mafioso families applies to the movies as it did to the book. Perhaps this says something about best-selling fiction. Is it basically cinematic writing? So many slick best-sellers have translated so precisely into "giant" movies, movies that seem to slosh when they walk.

"The Godfather" is a study of power, and of men to whom power accrues. As long as it remains with these considerations the movie is on fairly firm footing. It is when it begins to glorify (and it does to some degree) both such men and their methods of attaining their less than legal goals that it begins to resemble a thousand other movies of the last fifty years. "The Godfather" implies that only those men for whom violence is a mere means to an end, rather than a way of life, are capable of utilizing power. Santino Corleone is a violent man. Santino Corleone can not handle power and it kills him when he becomes personally violent. Michael Corleone, on the other hand, has always disliked violence, though he is capable of using it when it becomes necessary. Michael Corleone inherits and strengthens the family power base.

Perhaps the message of "The Godfather" is contained in the statement by Lord Acton that "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely." Michael is both wielder and victim of his family's power. It changes him gradually from a warm and concerned person to a cold and calculating reflex. Power is a living thing. It finds a vessel in which it can be carried, and molds that vessel to its own uses.

jerry griggs

The Greatest

"The Greatest Story Ever Told" is a shameless rip-off of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Don't let the fancy ads get you worked up. This movie, originally released in 1965, was a very unemotional presentation of the life of Christ our Saviour.

Max Von Sydow plays the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth without the peace that passeth all understanding. He is sadly not a true member in the Fold of our Shepherd, Jesus, Son of God or he would know that our One Lord is the Only One Lord and it would be silly for him to do anything. Von Sydow can only offer us an Anti-Christ.

John Wayne also has a very interesting role. He plays a centurion for their side and only has one line to speak (and he screws that up horribly). Shelley Winters, befittingly, plays a whore who is getting stoned.

The whole film is less moving than Onan plowing his wares.

If our Lord were a Jealous Lord, He certainly would have zapped everybody who helped make this wretched film.

The Hospital

Five people were nominated for the Academy Award as best actor for'71 films. One among the five really deserved such recognition. That one was George C. Scott for his role in "The Hospital." Scott turns this funny but sometimes awkward film into an entertaining production. If there were truth and honesty in the presentation of Academy Awards, Scott would have won this year as he did last.

Little chance of such an occurence existed, however. Scott alienated many Academy members last year by refusing the award. That he was even nominated this year is something of a surprise. Gene Hackman, as expected, won the Oscar for "The French Connection" The only one who had been given a chance to upset Hackman was Peter Finch, whose performance in "Sunday, Bloody Sunday" drew recognition.

The main difference between Scott's performance and those of other contenders lay in the difference between an expression of cold indifference or cruelty, and one of passion and despair. Hackman goes through the major portion of "The French Connection" with three emotional states; coldness (entailing indifference) frustration, and determination . Finch is sustained through the entire length of "Sunday, Bloody Sunday" by a peculiar immobility of face. In each of these cases, it seems more that the role itself was nominated for the award, and the actor applauded for having the sense not to louse it up.

But can such a performance be honestly held up for all to see and labeled with the sacred work "Best?" Are not such performances more appropriately termed "mimicry" rather than "acting?" Is lack of failure equivalent to success? Perhaps I am being carried away by irritation and should get back on the positive side of the question.

Significantly, the movie "The Hospital" moves when George C. Scott does. As long as the good doctor is the center focus of the camera, the film is absorbing and seems to be original and worthwhile. Beside Mr. Scott, the other performances in the film lack conviction. The supporting characters seem to be conscious of their position as characters rather than being the people they supposedly portray. They snicker at themselves. Paddy Chayefsky won an Oscar for his screenplay, but some of the scenes and speeches are unacceptable. Notably, Scott is the only one in the cast who seems able to handle lines with anything approaching realism.

Of course, I recognize the intentionally absurd nature of both plot and characters, but why is it the Scott bring across both serious intent and comic undertones, whereas everyone else can't seem to keep a straight face? Scott has been lightly criticized for overdramatizing the first part of the movie,thus creating a disparity of tone with the latter protion.

But this is due to the fact that in the latter portion of the film Scott no longer occupies center stage alone. The comic dramatic tone which Scott's performance builds up early is shattered by Diana Rigg's constant expression of inner amusement and Barnard Hughes's inability to struggle with Chayefsky's absurd murderer saint, rendering only what is in the script, and not transcending the role as written. Also, the latter half of the script simply is not as strong as the first.

Chayefsky, when thrown upon his own devices, has come up with a movie filled with stock medical humor and rather uninspired social comment. Had a less talented actor been cast into the main role instead of George C. Scott, "The Hospital" would have received very little attention, and Chayefsky would probably not have been awaiting April 10 with any great degree of anticipation. As it is, Scott, rather wisely directed by Arthur Hiller breathes life into the film, and "The Hospital" comes up smelling like a rose.

New releases

(Continued from page 13)

disasters, many of their previously unreleased tracks, and a representative portion from their film soundtrack, "Percy." For the Kink Kultists (as John Mendelsohn calls us in his lengthy and exhaustingly complete liner notes) the album is long overdue. Six of the cuts on "Kink Kronikles" are taken from an aborted album attempt from 1968. The first of these two albums was reportedly to be called "Four More Respected Gentlemen", and contained "Berkely Mews" and "King Kong." The second scheduled album was untitled but was assigned the same project number as the other one. It contained, among others, "Days" and "Polly." The reasoning for not releasing the two albums was simple: other Kinks albums were not selling well in America. Many of these songs show up here for the first time.

In addition to the unreleased selections, "The Kink Kronikles" contains Ray Davies' and the Kinks' greatest hits from the "Sunny Afternoon" period to "Lola." Collected here together for the first time "The Village Green Preservation Society" is as vibrant and vital as it ever was, and "Shangri-La" and "Victoria" never sounded as important.

In the "History of Eric Clapton", the choice of selections is not nearly so revealing as the Kinks anthology, but the end result of these mainly familiar cuts produces a similar effect: a very entertaining collection of important releases. Again, this anthology goes to the trouble of collecting material from varied sources, and many of the songs from Clapton's early career are taken from obscure albums. Even the later cuts come from such diverse sources as the Delaney & Bonnie live album and a King Curtis album, so that hardly anyone with an interest in Clapton is likely to own even as much as two-thirds of the two-record set.

The album includes representative selections from Clapton's days with the Yardbirds, Mayall's Bluesbreakers, Cream, Blind Faith and Derek and the Dominoes, and it's safe to say the persons in charge of compiling the material went to some degree of trouble to choose the most representative selections.

The Clapton album is more worthy of being called a true documentary, and the Kinks album is the more exciting of the two, but both are extremely worthwhile albums released just at the right time for us to once again appreciate, and be somewhat rejuvenated by, the recent past.

In the past Humble Pie's contributions to the musical style we can now call British blues (rock cum blues) totaled more than the sum of what they borrowed. On their latest album, "Smokin," they seem to be borrowing as much as they can and contributing hardly anything new at all.

Of course, since much of what they're using here is only borrowed from themselves it's all very ethical. It's just not too interesting. Much of their problem deals with not knowing when to quit. Their last studio album "Rock On," was, until the release of the obviously better "Led Zeppelin IV", one of the two best representations of the genre. The only real problem the album had was, as expected, one overly-long and boring cut. The group's last album, recorded live at the Fillmore, again had many tracks that suffered from repetition. On "Smokin" Humble Pie not only rehashes their own material ("I Wonder" sounds like their "Rolling Stone"), but they borrow several bars from Cream's "Toad" ("C'mon, Everybody") and Free's "All Right Now" ("30 Days In The Hole").

The album is generally without a high point and is missing the occasional bit of spardonic humor they once were good at. The two excellent acoustic pieces, particularly "You're So Good To Me," save the album from being less a success than it is. And, yes, it is still successful when analyzed on its own. It simply does not measure up to previous standards.

The Everly Brothers first album in several years, "Stories We Could Tell", is actually a very pleasant album, somewhat in the comfortable style of one of John Sebastian's better releases. It's not at all an accident, either. Sebastian is only one of the many well known musicians who have contributed to the album, adding, as most of the musicians did, not so much an outstanding performance as an overall spirit.

For the most part the album is an interpretation of other people's music using other people's misicians (Delaney and Bonnie, Clarence White, David Crosby, Ry Cooder, John Barbata, Jim Gordon, Graham Nash and Chris Ethridge), but none of it seems to gel quite as well as the tracks written by the Everly Brothers and performed with a minimum of accompaniment. Especially successful is the Brothers' "Green River."

There's a right way of doing it and a wrong way. The producers of "Hendrix in The West" have done it the right way, and the producers of "Live Cream Volumne II" have done it the wrong way.

The justification for the release of these two live albums, both in a way issued posthumously, is debatable, but both are welcome releases despite the faults and greedy schemes involved. Since neither group had any control over the production of the albums, and since both groups have long been defunct, the only justification for their release is that of being historic recordings.

It would seem the albums exist to fill a previous void and that they do (though I now have three versions of Cream's "Politician"), but one must simple guess at what point in time the albums were recorded. The Hendrix album notes drummer and bass player, and even the place of recording, but the Cream album says little more than "Clapton, Bruce and Baker." From between-songs comments, it seems the album was recorded soon after "Wheels of Fire" was released, but there is no hint at all as to where.

Live versions of "White Room" and "Sunshine of Your Love," sloppy and poorly recorded as they are, certainly are appreciated, but a few documentary notes would at least make it seem more than a capitalistic effort.

tom priddy